

L, TUESDAY, MAY 2, 1978

Russians and Cubans in Africa

By ARTHUR SCHLESINGER JR.

In recent weeks Washington has resurrected the doctrine of linkage. Linkage means that, if the Russians make trouble in one area—Africa, for example—we will seek to punish them by denying them something in another area—say, the SALT talks. Linkage began as a cherished theory of the Nixon administration. It had little effect when applied. The Carter administration started by disowning it. Now the White House, though not the State Department, appears to be sidling toward it, apparently because it cannot figure out any other way of reacting to the Soviet-Cuban assault on Africa.

The doctrine presents an evident difficulty. It implies in the case at hand that we are doing the Soviet Union a great favor by trying to reach a SALT agreement. But obviously the only reason we are engaged in SALT talks at all is because we believe the limitation of nuclear weapons to be in our own interest. If we did not believe that, we had no business in holding the talks. Arms control is a favor not just to the Soviet Union but to ourselves as well, and to all mankind. To say that we won't conclude an arms control agreement because we don't like what the Russians are doing in Africa deserves precisely the childish metaphors that spring to mind: cutting off our nose to spite our face, or threatening to go into the garden and eat dirt. If arms control is in our own interest, as it plainly is, we punish ourselves quite as much as we do the Russians in declining to reach an agreement.

Linkage raises another question: Exactly what kind of Communist threat is this in Africa that we are getting so excited about? A recurrent experience of the American people is to discover that some exotic locality of which they had not previously heard is vital to the national security of the United States. An unknown place that had never before disturbed our dreams suddenly becomes a dagger pointed at the heart of something or other, a capstone to a hitherto undiscerned arch, the key to some momentous global conflict.

Yesteryear's Prophecy

A few years ago the high priests of national security told us that the communization of Vietnam would be fatal to our world position. In consequence we endured the most disgraceful war in our history to "save" Vietnam. Well, we lost the war, and Indochina indeed went Communist. What happened to our world position? Today the Communist states are fighting savagely among themselves, as could have been predicted, and the threat to American security has not visibly increased.

Now that we are mercifully out of Southeast Asia, the high priesthood, which has a vested interest in crisis, tells us that Africa has become the key to our security. In 1976 we were given to understand that Angola was the crucial spot. In early 1978 everything suddenly turned on the Horn of Africa. The Horn of Africa! Who among us had ever heard of the Horn of Africa six months ago? Yet our national fate was deeply involved, highest authority instructed us, in the outcome of a local conflict between Somalia and Ethiopia.

And all this, we are assured, is only the beginning. The diabolical Russians and Cubans are engaged in a monster plot to take over all Africa. "We are witnessing the most determined campaign to expand foreign influence in this troubled region," Frank Carlucci, the deputy secretary of the Senate Armed Services Committee,

tee, "since it was carved up by the European powers in the late 19th Century. . . . It is my view that Moscow and Havana intend to take advantage of every such opportunity to demonstrate that those who accept their political philosophy can also count on receiving their assistance."

Let us try to sort out some of these issues. No one can doubt that the Russians are using the Cubans in a massive effort to dominate Africa, nor that success in this effort would create problems for the West. But an intention does not by itself constitute a threat. The serious question is: What prospect do the Russians have for establishing a permanent presence in Africa?

Now Africa is a multiracial culture, possessed by its own traditions, absorbed in

Board of Contributors

If the Soviet Union wants to plunge into its own quagmire in Africa, I do not think this need be a major worry for us. Africans have not got rid of one set of white masters in order to replace them by another.

its own problems, indifferent to the outside world, consumed by indigenous emotions of nationalism and tribalism, immune to Western ideas and institutions. It is safe to say that communism is as irrelevant as parliamentary democracy to the historic patterns of African thought and behavior. Evelyn Waugh remains the best guide to the idiocy of the West trying to do anything in an awakened Africa. To invoke Waugh, I suppose, is to risk charges of frivolity or worse. Such a reaction misses Waugh's essential point. What he wrote about with deadly accuracy in "Scoop" and "Black Mischief" was the total irrelevance to African mores of Western values, as proved both by the Westerners who tried to impose them and the Africans who tried to adopt them. Communism and capitalism are in the African view equally Western, equally materialistic, equally rationalistic, equally remote from a system of ancient and irremediably tribal cultures.

When Mr. Carlucci says that the Russians are helping "those who accept their political philosophy," he is kidding the Armed Services Committee, and no doubt himself too. Like all nationalists, black African leaders fighting their private wars are delighted to con any outsider into helping them. But the meaningless rhetoric they offer Moscow in exchange does not mean for a minute that they "accept" the Communist "political philosophy." Nor do their wars have anything to do with the Cold War.

I remember an Anglo-American meeting about the Congo in the early Kennedy years. Some in the American government had got it into their heads that the civil war over Katanga would enable Moscow to gain a bridgehead in the center of Africa and that the West must act at once to prevent this dangerous development. I noticed that David Ormsby-Gore, the wise British ambassador to Washington, was silent during the frenetic discussion. I asked him later what he made of it all. He said, "I don't think we need get so agitated about tribal wars in Africa. After all, every

country has the right to its own Wars of the Roses."

I do not suggest that we should regard the Soviet-Cuban intervention with complacency. Let us denounce it fervently in all the forums where men of international goodwill gather together. But don't let's take it all that seriously in our own councils. The Soviet Union does not have a hex on Africa. Most Africans who have been to Moscow cordially dislike the Russians as racists. The Russian record in Africa has been one of substantial failure—in Ghana, in Guinea, in Somalia, in Egypt. Neither Angola nor Ethiopia affords them any solid footing than Vietnam afforded us. If the Soviet Union wants to plunge into its own quagmire in Africa, I do not think this need be a major worry for us. One thing is quite certain: Africans have not got rid of one set of white masters in order to replace them by another.

And Back Home in Cuba

As for Cubans, Castro's imperial dreams are heading him for the gravest trouble at home. It is notable how little the government-controlled press and television tell the Cuban people about the Maximum Leader's African adventures. Troops leave for Africa in civilian clothes and the stealth of night. "The Cuban investment in Africa," Hugh Thomas, author of the best history of Cuba, reminds us, "is an enormous one for a country of nine million people. The burdens are being felt in Cuba itself"—a shortage of doctors; problems in the schools and in harvesting the sugar crop; rumors of desertion and even mutiny in the Cuban army. Thomas asks: "When will the discontent that many are feeling because of a seemingly endless African commitment, including deaths, merge with irritation at the cost of the commitment? Is the recent crime wave to which Castro drew attention (in a speech on Sept. 28) a symptom of this?" If Castro continues to try to nail the African trophy on the wall, he is likely to end up as popular in Cuba as Lyndon Johnson was in the United States in 1968.

The odds are overwhelmingly against the establishment of any permanent Soviet or Cuban presence in Africa. In any case those who would be most directly threatened by it are the independent black states. Why not let them deal with it in the first instance? We should do nothing to push them toward the Russians—for example, by temporizing with regard to Rhodesia or South Africa—but we should not try to pretend that we know better than they do where their own interests lie. And let us above all ignore the interventionist harangues of those who told us only a little while back that our national security required an all-out effort in Vietnam. "If you believe the doctors," old Lord Salisbury sensibly said, "nothing is wholesome; if you believe the theologians nothing is innocent; if you believe the soldiers nothing is safe."

Let us recognize that our interests in Africa are limited, that our wisdom about Africa is even more limited and that our power to decide the future of Africa is very limited indeed. Let us be extremely cautious about trying to settle African problems that Africans will, and must, settle for themselves.

Mr. Schlesinger is Albert Schweitzer Professor of the Humanities at the City University of New York, winner of Pulitzer Prize for Biography and a member of the Journal's Board of Contributors.